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SUBJECT: BORIS YELTSIN'S VISIT TO LATVIA

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¶1. (C) Summary: Boris Yeltsin's visit to Latvia to mark 15 years since the restoration of independence is viewed by GOL officials as another positive sign in relations with Moscow. Originally a private visit, both Latvian and Russian sources agree that it was upgraded at the request of President Putin.

While hard-line nationalists on both sides in Latvia were negative on the warm reception given to Yeltsin, the mainstream views were positive. Yeltsin was critical of Latvian perceptions of Russia in a news conference, but his point was that the current Russian Federation should not be held liable for the errors of the Soviet Union and the comments did not detract from the visit's success. While positive about the visit and other Russian moves, GOL officials remain cautious about predicting any breakthrough in relations with Russia. End summary.

¶2. (C) Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin visited Latvia August 22 - 24, his first visit since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Pol/econ chief discussed his visit with Andrejs Pildegovics, Chief of Staff to President Vike-Freiberga, Peteris Ustubs, foreign policy advisor to PM Kalvitis, and Oleg Osintsev, pol external counselor at the Russian Embassy, who was the Embassy's control officer for Yeltsin. In addition to his formal program, Yeltsin had a number of private meetings with Latvians who were his contemporaries in the late-80's and in the 1990's. Pildegovics and Ustubs both noted that Yeltsin was sharp throughout and often spoke to the public or in meetings without notes, but both commented that Yeltsin became visibly tired over the course of each day.

¶3. (C) The purpose of the visit was for Yeltsin to receive Latvia's highest award, the Order of Three Stars, for his role in recognizing Baltic independence in August 1991. The decoration had originally been awarded to him in 2000, but at the time Yeltsin refused to come to Riga to receive the award, complaining that Latvia was "rewriting history" and committing "gross violations of human rights" in its treatment of its ethnic Russian population. President Vike-Freiberga quietly reached out earlier in the year and suggested a private visit to receive the award on the 15th anniversary of the events of August 1991. Yeltsin accepted. As the visit drew nearer, it received some official sanction from the Kremlin, with Pildegovics saying it was clear from the official plane and security escort that Putin had signed off on the plan. Osintsev told us that Putin reached out to Yeltsin to ask him to make the trip.

¶4. (C) Upon receiving the award, Yeltsin explained away his 2000 comments as "a diplomatic misunderstanding." According to Pildegovics, in his private meeting with Vike-Freiberga, Yeltsin did raise the status of the Russian population, especially those who have not been naturalized. The President responded that, under Latvian law, it was no longer for people who acquire Latvian citizenship to retain a second citizenship. Yeltsin also raised the border treaty,

signature on which was delayed when the Latvians attempted to add a preamble Moscow found offensive. Pildegovics said it seemed that Yeltsin was concerned that Latvia was delaying the treaty to claim a small strip of land along the border, but Latvia made clear in their EU and NATO accession documents that they make no such claim. For the rest of meeting, Yeltsin was very anti-Soviet in his remarks and highly critical of Gorbachev.

15. (C) Yeltsin spent a large amount of time with PM Kalvitis, having dinner together on two nights, traveling to the 800-year old town of Cesis in central Latvia, and spending several hours fishing outside Cesis. According to Ustubs this was done to fill Yeltsin's schedule with time with GOL officials to show the Latvian commitment to better relations with Russia and also to preempt attempts by the Russian Embassy to add in meetings with some of the harder-line Russian groups here. (Comment: It had the added benefit of keeping Yeltsin out of Riga on August 23, the anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when several protests were held outside the Russian Embassy. End comment.) Ustubs described the interaction between Yeltsin and Kalvitis as friendly and relaxed. When they were in Cesis, several hundred people came out to see Yeltsin and shake his hand. Yeltsin commented to Kalvitis that it was the warmest reception he had received in some time and far kinder than his usual greetings within Russia.

16. (U) Before leaving, Yeltsin held a press conference, where participation was limited only to the less reputable press. The major Latvian and Russian language dailies and the TV stations were not invited. To this audience, Yeltsin complained of Latvian claims of occupation by Russia. He stridently rebutted that it was the Soviet Union that had wronged Latvia and not Russia, pointing out that it was he as

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President of Russia who had recognized Baltic independence. His comments did not receive widespread coverage. Overall, press coverage of the visit was positive, with the main centrist Latvian language daily Diena arguing that Yeltsin had not received enough credit for all he had done for Latvia in restoring independence.

17. (C) Comment: There was plenty of potential for trouble in this visit and the fact that it happened without significant incident is important in and of itself. Hard-liners on both sides of Latvia's ethnic divide opposed the visit; Latvians because they did not think the State should honor any Russian until apology and reparations are made for the Soviet occupation, and Russians who believe that Yeltsin betrayed them both by recognizing Latvia's independence and by pulling out Russian troops before there were full guarantees for the rights of the Russian population. But the sensible center held. Yeltsin left in a positive light and even his comments on occupation were recognized by many as being in line with his strong anti-Soviet views rather than an attempt to attack Latvia. Everyone wants the credit for avoiding the meetings with the Russian population here, with the Embassy saying that they wanted Yeltsin to focus on the economic relationship. More likely, both sides recognized that given the views of Yeltsin among the Russian population here, such a meeting could easily descend into acrimony. The Latvians view positively the obvious role the Kremlin played in this visit, but remain very cautious about trying to guess whether this portends any warming of relations. As one Latvian official said, "We're showing that we can handle these visits well. We know Moscow is watching. We don't know what they plan to do next."

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